

**THE ORIGINS OF**  

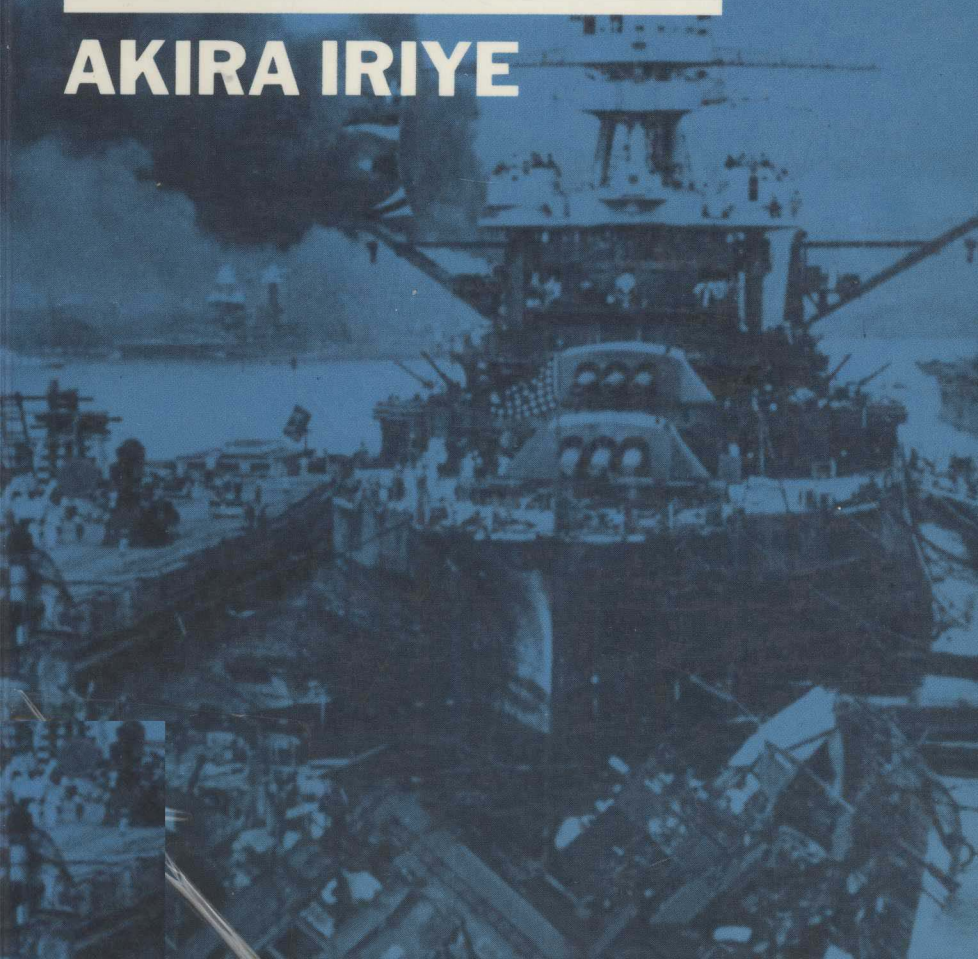
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**THE SECOND  
WORLD WAR**  
**IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**  

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**AKIRA IRIYE**

**ORIGINS OF  
MODERN  
WARS**



# THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

*Akira Iriye*



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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Professor Akira Iriye's contribution to the *Origins of Modern Wars* series deals with the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, and so complements Mr Philip Bell's volume on the Second World War in Europe. Professor Iriye's study casts a brilliant shaft of light on the Japanese and American policies which led to the fatal denouement at Pearl Harbor. If the motives of all Japanese ministers were basically the same – to secure economic independence and a greater degree of authority for Japan in Asia and the Pacific, their theories on how those aims could be achieved varied profoundly. A special value of this book is the author's familiarity with the domestic political struggles in Tokyo, and his profound understanding of the complexities in a situation which at first sight appears a simple one. He shows how policies with basic flaws could seem to have an unanswerable logic of their own, and how nuances of difference in strategic hypotheses could come to have a catastrophic significance.

From the early 1930s onwards there were some Japanese ministers whose recommendations, if accepted, would have led away from war, and others whose recommendations would lead, often unwittingly, towards war. Once again, as so often in this series, it is made apparent that the ideas of individual ministers, officials or diplomats influence events, sometimes in a fundamental sense. They are by no means always at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Akira Iriye demonstrates that Japanese ministers would have preferred to avoid war with the USA and Britain, but were prepared – in degrees which varied from one minister to another – to face war if it became, by their judgement, unavoidable. The emperor remained throughout more doubtful about the wisdom of going to war with the USA than were his ministers. The army leaders were more eager for war than the civilians. It would be tempting to argue that such is always the case, but Dr Peter Lowe has shown that American military leaders before the Korean War (apart from General MacArthur, about whom most generalizations would be misleading) were more cautious than were Truman and the civilians in Washington. While it is reasonable to assume that generals are more belligerent than civilian ministers simply because war is the *raison d'être*

## Editor's foreword

of generals, it is also true that generals are often more aware than their civilian colleagues of the unpreparedness of their armies.

The miscalculations, or failures of imagination, by political leaders as causes of wars are becoming familiar features of this series. They were present in James Joll's *Origins of the First World War*, Ian Nish's *Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* of 1904 and T. C. W. Blanning's *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*. In the present work by Akira Iriye misconceptions and miscalculations play a subtle role. When Japan went to war with China in 1937 the Japanese had probably assessed the relative military strengths of the two nations correctly. But they failed to appreciate the complexity and fluid nature of the diplomatic situation in the world as a whole. That complexity is illustrated by the fact that Nazi Germany had military advisers in China, and Soviet Russia was sending arms to Chiang Kai-shek's government in spite of the presence in China of Communists hostile to Chiang's regime. Professor Iriye will probably surprise many readers by his account of how Hitler's government was called upon to mediate between China and Japan, and might possibly have succeeded in doing so if Chiang had been prepared to compromise, though his refusal to do so was understandable enough. Not until 1938 did Hitler finally decide to side with Japan against China.

If Japanese ministers were reluctant to face diplomatic complexities in 1937 they were more prepared to do so after the war had started in Europe, although the complexities had become even more confusing. The Japanese assumption that Russia would always ultimately be the enemy had been shaken by Hitler's pact with Stalin in 1939. It then became possible that Russia could, at least temporarily, become an ally of Japan against the Anglo-Saxon powers. But when Hitler in 1941 invaded Russia without giving his Japanese ally any forewarning of his intentions, even the most imaginative diplomat in Tokyo could have been excused for feeling that his task was becoming an impossible one. Yet successive Japanese ministers analysed the position with some thoroughness. To ask whether the Japanese government then decided on war with the USA in the mistaken belief that they were bound to win is grossly to over-simplify the question. Sometimes countries have gone to war in the assumption that they will win easily, and have proceeded to do so. Dr Ritchie Ovendale's account of Israel going to war in 1956 is perhaps as good an example as any of such a development. More often, confidence in a quick victory has proved to be a delusion. The Japanese in 1941 do not fit into either category. Their military and naval leaders believed in a quick initial victory, and this they secured. They had also convinced the government that if they did not go to war at that moment their position would deteriorate and they would fall slowly but irretrievably under the economic control of America. A gamble was therefore worth taking. In Professor Iriye's words: 'As Nagano explained to the emperor, Japan had the choice of doing nothing, which would lead to its collapse within a few years, or going to war while there

was at least a 70 or 80 per cent chance of initial victory.' 'Initial' was still the operative word, and it was therein that the flaw in the argument lay.

Britain did not adopt a policy of appeasement towards Japan from 1937 to 1941 in the same way that she did towards Germany from 1936 to 1938. Instead she followed the USA in an attempt to deter Japan from aggression. Professor Iriye shows that the concept of 'deterrence' in a fully fledged form was put across by Roosevelt towards Japan during the 'phoney' war in Europe in the winter of 1939-40. 'Deterrence' is not, of course, a form of defence, although in the 1980s its day-to-day administration is sometimes left in the hands of so-called ministers of 'defence'. Deterrence is an alternative to defence. Anthony Eden backed up Roosevelt's policy of deterrence of Japan in 1940 and 1941, saying that a 'display of firmness is more likely to deter Japan from war than to provoke her to it'. The policy of deterrence failed miserably. It was not only the Japanese who miscalculated in 1941.

HARRY HEARDER



# PREFACE

In this book I have tried to examine the origins of the 1941–1945 war in Asia and the Pacific in what may be termed a systemic perspective; the focus is on changing international frameworks that provided the setting for the foreign policies of the principal actors. That, obviously, is only one of many perspectives, and other historians have presented them with skill. I have thought it useful to adopt the systemic approach since the Asian-Pacific war was a multinational conflict, a chapter in modern international history. What follows, then, is an international history of the prewar period.

Professor Hearder, editor of the series of which this book is a volume, first approached me in 1978 with the suggestion that I attempt such a book. Since then, he has been patient and thoughtful as he has kept in touch with me at every stage of my writing. I am grateful for his support, and for the help of the editors at Longman for their efficient assistance. My indebtedness to co-workers in international history is too heavy and extensive to enumerate, but I would like to express my special thanks to nine historians with whom I have met regularly to exchange ideas, and who have helped me enormously in clarifying my ideas: Sherman Cochran, Warren Cohen, Waldo Heinrichs, Gary Hess, Chihiro Hosoya, Luo Rong-qu, Robert Messer, Katsumi Usui, and Wang Xi. To Marnie Veghte who edited and typed the manuscript, Masumi Iriye who proofread it, and my wife who did everything else to help me complete it, I remain grateful.

AKIRA IRIYE  
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*Peter Lowe*

THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN  
ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

*Akira Iriye*

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# INTRODUCTION

On 18 September 1931, a small number of Japanese and Chinese soldiers clashed outside of Fengtien (Mukden) in southern Manchuria – an event which soon developed into what was to be a long, drawn-out, intermittent war between China and Japan. Over ten years later, on 7 December 1941, Japanese air, naval, and land forces attacked American, British, and Dutch possessions throughout Asia and the Pacific. It marked the beginning of Japan's war against the combined forces of China, America, Britain, the Netherlands and, ultimately, France and the Soviet Union.

How did a war between two Asian countries develop into one in which a single nation was pitted against a multinational coalition? Clearly, from Japan's perspective the development signalled a failure to prevent the formation of such a coalition; on the other hand, for China it was a culmination of its efforts to create an international force to isolate and punish Japan. Why did the Western powers, which stood by while Japanese forces overran Manchuria in 1931, end up by coming to China's assistance ten years later even at the risk of war with Japan?

These are among the central questions as one considers the origins of the Second World War in the Asian-Pacific region. The Second World War actually consisted of two wars, one in Europe and the Atlantic, and the other in Asia and the Pacific. The two theatres were, for the most part, distinct; battles fought and bombings carried out in one were little linked to those in the other. However, while it is quite possible to discuss the origins of the European war without paying much attention to Asian factors, the obverse is not the case. European powers were deeply involved in the Asian-Pacific region and played an important role in transforming the Chinese-Japanese conflict into a multinational one. Moreover, the United States, which too was of little relevance to the immediate causes of the European war, steadily developed into a major Asian-Pacific power so that its position would have a direct bearing on the course of the Chinese-Japanese War. The Asian-Pacific region, then, was an arena of more extensive global rivalry than Europe, and this fact should always be kept in mind as one discusses the origins of the Pacific war. Still, in 1931 it might have seemed that the region was

isolated from the rest of the world, and that Japan could engage in its acts of aggression without fearing a collective reprisal. Why it was able to do so at the beginning of the decade, whereas ten years later it would be confronted by a multinational coalition, provides the framework for this book.

## JAPAN'S CHALLENGE TO THE WASHINGTON CONFERENCE SYSTEM

Japan had not always been an international loner. On the contrary, the country's leadership and national opinion had emphasized the cardinal importance of establishing Japan as a respected member of the community of advanced powers. And in the 1920s it had enjoyed such a status. The treaties it signed during the Washington Conference (1921–22) symbolized it. In one – the naval disarmament treaty – Japan was recognized as one of the three foremost powers; together with the United States and Britain, the nation would seek to maintain an arms equilibrium in the world and contribute to stabilizing the Asian-Pacific region. Another treaty, signed by these three plus France, provided for a mechanism whereby they would consult with one another whenever the stability was threatened. Most important, the nine-power treaty (signed by Japan, the United States, Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, and China) established the principle of international co-operation in China. Eight signatories were to co-operate with respect to the ninth, China, to uphold the latter's independence and integrity, maintain the principle of equal opportunity, and to provide an environment for the development of a stable government. Japan was a full-fledged member of the new treaty regime, which historians have called the Washington Conference system.<sup>1</sup> Since much of the story of the 1930s revolves around Japan's challenge to these treaties, it is well at the outset to examine what was involved in the regime.

The term 'the Washington Conference system', or 'the Washington system' for short, was not in current use in the 1920s, nor was it subsequently recognized as a well-defined legal concept. None the less, immediately after the conference there was much talk of 'the spirit of the Washington Conference', and a country's behaviour in Asia tended to be judged in terms of whether it furthered or undermined that spirit. As such it connoted more a state of mind than an explicit mechanism; it expressed the powers' willingness to co-operate with one another in maintaining stability in the region and assisting China's gradual transformation as a modern state. It was viewed as an alternative to their unilateral policies or exclusive alliances and *ententes* aimed at

particularistic objectives. Instead, the Washington system indicated a concept of multinational consultation and co-operation in the interest of regional stability. By the same token, this spirit was essentially gradualist and reformist, not radical or revolutionary. It was opposed to a rapid and wholesale transformation of Asian international relations, such as was being advocated by the Communist International and by an increasing number of Chinese nationalists. Rather, the Washington powers would stress an evolutionary process of change so as to ensure peace, order, and stability.

In that sense, there *was* a system of international affairs defined by the Washington treaties, for a system implies some status quo, a mechanism for maintaining stability against radical change. The status quo was envisaged by the Washington powers not as a freeze but as a regime of co-operation among them in the interest of gradualism. As such, it was part of the postwar framework of international affairs that had been formulated in the Covenant of the League of Nations and reaffirmed through such other arrangements as the Locarno treaty of 1925 and the pact of Paris of 1928. The former stabilized relations among Britain, France, and Germany, while the latter, signed by most countries, enunciated the principle that they should not resort to force for settling international disputes. The Washington treaties were thus part of an evolving structure that embraced the entire world.

Moreover, there was an economic system that underlay the structure. All the Washington signatories were linked to one another through their acceptance of the gold standard. More precisely called 'the gold exchange standard', the mechanism called upon nations to accept gold as the medium of international economic transactions, to link their currencies to gold, and to maintain the principle of currency convertibility. Through such devices, it was believed that commercial activities across national boundaries would be carried out smoothly for the benefit of all. The gold-currency nations accounted for the bulk of the world's trade and investment, so that the Washington system was synonymous with and sustained by the gold regime. Since the majority of these countries were advanced capitalist economies, it is possible to characterize the Washington Conference system as capitalist internationalism, or even as a new form of imperialism.

Certainly, the Washington Conference did not eliminate empires. Most of the treaty signatories continued to maintain colonies, and some of them had even added new ones after the First World War. At the same time, however, they pledged themselves not to undertake further expansion at the expense of China. Instead, they would co-operate to restore to it a measure of independence so that in time it would emerge as a stabilizing factor in its own right. For this reason, China was a key to the successful functioning of the new system. Unlike the old imperialism, it would call upon the advanced colonial powers to work together to encourage an evolutionary transformation of that country.

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At the same time, China must also co-operate in the task so that it would become a full-fledged member of the community of Washington powers.

Till the late 1920s, the system worked by and large to bring order and stability to the Asian-Pacific region. There were few overtly unilateral acts by a Washington signatory, and the powers continued their mutual consultation as they sought to revise the old treaties with China. The latter, on its part, had come steadily to seek to realize its aspirations in co-operation with, rather than defiance of, the Washington powers. To be sure, Chinese Nationalists were initially adamantly opposed to the Washington Conference treaties, viewing them as a device for perpetuating foreign control. However, with their military and political successes, they emerged as the new leaders of the country, and with them there came a willingness to modify some of the radical rhetoric. After 1928, when they established a central government in Nanking under Chiang Kai-shek, they had to concentrate on domestic unification and economic development, tasks which necessitated foreign capital and technology, as well as a respite in international crises that would drain resources away from much-needed projects at home. Between 1928 and 1931, they achieved some significant gains. Nanking's political control was more extended than at any time since the end of the Manchu dynasty in 1912. The country's infrastructure – roads, bridges, telephone and telegraph networks – was being constructed through imported capital, mostly American. A modern system of education was producing the next generation's élites. The volume of China's foreign trade increased steadily, as did customs receipts. Reforms of internal tax and currency systems, again with the aid of foreign experts, were gradually putting an end to the fiscal chaos that had plagued the country for decades.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese leadership at this time was thus not seeking to do away with the existing international order, but to integrate their country into it as a full-fledged member. China would persist in its efforts to regain its sovereign rights and to develop itself as a modern state, but these objectives were not incompatible with the co-operative framework of the Washington treaties. In fact, it could be argued that the Washington system was serving as an effective instrument for obtaining foreign support for Chinese development. The United States, Britain, Japan and others one by one recognized the Nanking regime, signed new treaties for tariff revision, and began negotiations for an ultimate abrogation of extra-territoriality, the traditional symbol of China's second-class status. Although these negotiations dragged on, by 1931 differences between China and the powers had narrowed considerably, so that a full restoration of jurisdictional authority to Chinese courts seemed to be a matter of time. It was at that juncture that the Japanese army struck, not only to oppose further concessions to Chinese nationalism, but ultimately to redefine the international system itself.

The revolt against the Washington Conference system may, para-

doxically, be viewed as evidence that the system had steadily become strengthened; those opposed to it would have to resort to drastic measures to undermine it. Within the framework of the Washington treaties, the powers had by and large succeeded in stabilizing their mutual relations, putting a premium on economic rather than military issues as they dealt with one another, and co-opting Chinese nationalism by integrating the country step by step into a global economic order. This very success drove some forces in Japan – army and navy officers, right-wing organizations, nativist intellectuals – to desperation. They saw nothing but disaster in an international system that was steadily making concessions to China and in a global economic order that linked the nation's well-being so intimately to fluctuations in trade balances and rates of exchange. They accused the Japanese leadership of having created a situation where the nation's destiny appeared to depend more and more on the goodwill of the powers and of China. Unless something were done, Japan would soon be completely at the mercy of these outside forces. Japan's anti-internationalists saw only one solution: to reverse the trend in national policy by forcefully removing the country's leadership committed to internationalism, and to act in China in defiance of the Washington treaties. They judged that the early 1930s was the time to carry out such tasks, perhaps the last possible chance to do so.

The precise timing for action was a matter of some deliberation. But in many ways the year 1931 appeared the right moment.<sup>3</sup> For one thing, the government's commitment to the existing international order had begun to encounter widespread domestic opposition. In 1930 Japan under the cabinet of Hamaguchi Osachi had signed a new naval disarmament treaty in London. The treaty covered 'auxiliary craft' such as light cruisers and submarines which had been excluded from the provisions of the Washington naval treaty, and limited the total sizes of these ships that Japan, Britain, and the United States were allowed to possess. The new treaty established the allowable tonnages in the ratio of 6.975 for Japan and 10 for the other two. This was a higher ratio for Japan than the 6 to 10 formula for capital ships adopted by the Washington treaty, but it split the Japanese navy. Those who supported the government's acceptance of the new ratio (the 'treaty faction') confronted the adamant opposition of the 'fleet faction', determined to wage a public campaign against the treaty. The latter made it a constitutional issue, accusing the civilian government of having violated the emperor's 'right of supreme command', according to which the military presumably had direct access to the emperor as his advisers on command problems. Although no such case had been made after the Washington Conference, now the naval activists believed the public would be more receptive to this type of argument.

They judged the public mood and political climate of the country quite accurately. In 1925 Japan had instituted a universal manhood



suffrage, and the political parties had become sensitive to changing moods and diverse interests of the population. Although the bulk of the newly enfranchised public may have understood or cared little for international affairs, it appears that it paid attention to and was fascinated by the kind of argument put forth by the navy's anti-government minority and its sympathizers. This receptivity reflected the economic situation, for the coming of the age of mass politics coincided with the world economic crisis that began with the Wall Street crash of October 1929.<sup>4</sup> Although its effects in Japan were not as severe as those in the United States or Germany, in 1930 Japanese unemployment reached 1 million, while farm prices (particularly rice and silks) fell to the lowest point in years. Tenant farmers, unable to make their rent payments, sold their daughters into prostitution, and their sons were encouraged to move to Korea or Manchuria. Particularly hard-hit was Japan's export trade, of which more than 30 per cent consisted of silks. The worldwide recession drastically reduced silk exports and created huge balance of trade deficits.

Like most other countries at this time, the Japanese government sought to cope with the situation through monetary measures. In those pre-Keynesian days, monetarism provided orthodoxy. What determined prices, it was argued, was the amount of liquidity, which in turn depended on the gold reserve in a country's possession. As trade declined and exports fell, the gold reserve would dwindle, necessitating a tight money policy, presumably because such a policy would serve to reduce demand and ultimately balance trade. But it inevitably involved declining purchasing power and consequent unemployment. Whereas the monetarists believed these were temporary phenomena, those who suffered from the economic crisis thought otherwise, and demanded that something be done by their leaders to alleviate the situation. It is most likely that the Japanese public, even without understanding the niceties of economic theory, was now more receptive to anti-governmental propaganda and agitation because of the crisis. When the Hamaguchi cabinet decided, at the late hour of November 1929, to go back on the gold standard at an artificially high rate of exchange, it immediately condemned itself as a government of élites insensitive to popular suffering.

Japanese politics was thus at a point where anti-governmental agitation could go a long way, threatening the existing domestic order and the foreign policy built on it. A clear indication of this was the assassination of Prime Minister Hamaguchi by a right-wing terrorist in November 1930, barely a month after the ratification of the London disarmament treaty. The assassin was given sympathetic treatment in the press and in supportive mass rallies as a true patriot, selflessly trying to purge the country of a politician committed to unworkable solutions. The incident encouraged similar acts, so that between 1930 and 1936 several other leaders, those identified with the internationalism of the